DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 407 837 FL 024 497

AUTHOR Foster, Rosemary
TITLE The "Successful" Bilingual Senior High School Student.
PUB DATE 97
NOTE 15p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the American Educational Research Association (Chicago, IL, March 1997).
PUB TYPE Reports - Research (143) -- Speeches/Meeting Papers (150)
EDRS PRICE EDRS Price MF01 Plus Postage. PC Not Available from EDRS.
DESCRIPTORS *Academic Achievement; *Academic Persistence; *Bilingual Students; Bilingualism; Case Studies; Foreign Countries; *French; High School Students; High Schools; *Immersion Programs; Interviews; Language of Instruction; *Second Languages; Student Attitudes; Student Experience
IDENTIFIERS Canada; French Language Schools

ABSTRACT

A 1992 Canadian study and 1994 followup investigated the high school experience of six Anglophone French immersion students who participated in a pilot program in French immersion in elementary and junior high school and continued immersion study in high school. Data were gathered during the students' tenth grade, primarily in semi-structured interviews with students and their parents. The students were committed to studying core high school courses in French because of positive experiences in immersion. Perceived benefits included French fluency, ability to think in different ways, close-knit peer group, and pride in participation in a challenging alternative program. Perceived limitations included a shortage of bilingual content area teachers, restricted course selection, lack of appealing learning resources, limited program support for students having difficulty, and lack of recognition of the immersion program. A four-year followup revealed that all graduated with a bilingual certificate. One was valedictorian of his class and gave his speech in both English and French, and was later selected as top high school scholar in the province. Results suggest the students' "feeling of success" about early immersion experiences and family support were significant factors in immersion persistence. Parent perceptions of their children are also discussed. Contains 14 references. (MSE)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

ED 407 837

AERA ANNUAL MEETING 1997

The "Successful" Bilingual Senior High School Student

Rosemary Foster

University of Alberta

FL024497

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE AND DISSEMINATE THIS MATERIAL IN OTHER THAN PAPER COPY HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

Rosemary Foster

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

Introduction

Within the Canadian public school system, student enrollment in French Immersion programs is declining (Commissioner of Official Languages, 1996). In this paper, the issue of attrition and retention in secondary school French Immersion programs is addressed through the presentation of a descriptive profile of a group of "successful" bilingual high school students. The major findings of a qualitative study (Foster, 1992) which focused on selected grade ten students who made the decision to continue in French Immersion study at high school, support the construction of this profile. "Successful" in this context is used to describe a group of freshmen high school students who made the choice to continue French Immersion study based on their diverse experiences in second language learning in an immersion setting, as well as their scholastic record. By offering this perspective of "success," the contention here is congruent with what others have claimed (Tardif & Weber, 1987); consideration must be given to factors other than academic achievement and program limitations when probing the issue of participation levels in this bilingual alternative in high school programming.

An overview of French Immersion programming in Canada is presented at the beginning of this paper in order to contextualize the current issue of retention and attrition of students, as well as the discussion of the study (Foster, 1992) and the construction of the descriptive profile. To the extent possible, the article suggests possible implications for future study; however its main purpose is to contribute to current knowledge about student retention in senior high school French Immersion programs.

French Immersion Programming In Canada

Often referred to as the "immersion phenomenon," French immersion programming in Canada is an innovation in public schooling that has been "one of the most studied programs in the educational field in Canada" (MacIsaac, 1991, p. 36). Classrooms where students learn their second language "by use while learning something else and not be formal language instruction, is an experiential approach which has had a revolutionary

impact on second language learning and teaching" (Stern, 1984, p. 4). According to UCLA professor and researcher Stephen Krashen:

> Canadian immersion is not simply another successful language teaching programme--it may be the most successful programme ever recorded in the professional language-teaching literature. No programme has been as thoroughly studied and documented, and no programme, to my knowledge, has done as well. (Krashen, 1984, p. 61)

What started as a pilot project, an "experiment" in bilingual schooling (Lambert & Tucker, 1972) proposed by a small group of parents in the province of Québec in 1965, has now become an integral part of every Canadian province's educational system. In 1991 it was estimated that over 288,000 elementary and secondary school students were enrolled in French Immersion Programs throughout Canada (Commissioner of Official Languages, 1992, p. 217). More recent studies and statistics have indicated a leveling off and a drop in participation in this program of choice, particularly at the secondary level (Commissioner of Official Languages, 1996, pp. 98-101). A study conducted in the Carleton Board of Education in the province of Ontario found that 50 to 75 percent of French immersion students there dropped out of immersion (but not out of their studies) during high school (cited in the Annual Report of the Commissioner of Official Languages, 1992, p. 217). Figures released in 1990 revealed that of the total number of students enrolled in French Immersion programs in 1988 in the Canadian province of Alberta, only six percent were registered at the senior high school level (Alberta Education, 1990). Suggested in these findings was that students in several Canadian provinces were not choosing to continue in French immersion programs from kindergarten through grade twelve.

With the aim of investigating the variables associated with attrition and retention, a national study involving over 350 school districts throughout Canada was undertaken in 1991 (Halsall, 1991). Chief researcher Nancy Halsall reported in the summary document, *Attrition/retention of students in French immersion with particular emphasis on secondary school* (1991), that at the secondary level student attrition was between 20 and 80 percent

(p. 3). Findings from this national study supported the contentions that high school students tended to drop out of this alternative bilingual program because (a) there was a lack of variety in course offering, (b) the work load was too heavy, (c) there were other more appealing alternatives in programming, (d) they could achieve higher grades if they studied in English, (e) there was insufficient opportunity to speak French inside and outside of the classroom setting, (f) they were satisfied with their level of proficiency in their second language and did not see the purpose in continuing (p. 46). Even though research has reported on the positive association "between bilingualism and both general intellectual skills and divergent thinking" (Cummins & Swain, 1986, p. 10), the widespread perception that students who undertake secondary school studies in their second language may be disadvantaged persists. The issue of attrition and retention of students in senior high school French Immersion programs in Canada presents one of the greatest challenges in providing a comprehensive bilingual program, kindergarten through grade twelve (Halsall, 1991).

The Purpose Of The Study

When I conducted the literature review for my masters research study, *The French Immersion Choice At High School: Students and Parents Perspectives* (Foster, 1992), I found that numerous studies had investigated the issue of attrition and retention in French Immersion programs (Calgary Board of Education, 1991; Carleton Board of Education, 1991; Halsall, 1991), but that these studies tended to examine the reasons associated with students leaving the programs. None focused specifically on the perceptions of the students and parents who had made the choice to continue participation in the program at the high school level. The intent of my study (Foster, 1992) was to contribute to the knowledge about student retention in French Immersion programs. This was undertaken through the investigation of the perceptions and experiences of a selected group of Anglophone grade 10 students enrolled in the first year of a French Immersion program in a suburban centre in Alberta, Canada. This group of students had become involved in a

French Immersion pilot program in elementary and junior high school and had made the choice to take the core courses of their high school credit program in their second language. Specifically, the purpose of the study was to provide an interpretation of how the diverse experiences of these students had influenced their decision to continue in the program after junior high school. Because parents had helped make the initial choice for French Immersion in elementary school and many were involved when these children had selected to continue in the program at high school, it was assumed that the perspective of the parents would aid in contextualizing the students' understanding of their experiences.

The question directing this inquiry was: Why did this group of students choose to continue in a French Immersion program at high school, when the provincial and national trends indicated that their peers were choosing not to continue? Other questions that were central to the study were:

1. Why did these Anglophone parents and children initially choose this French Immersion pilot program?
2. What had been the "lived experience" of these French Immersion students now in senior high school?
3. Why had these students selected to take the core courses of their high school credit program in French, their second language?

Methods And Data Sources

For this study an interpretivist research methodology was adopted (Bogdan & Biklen, 1982). The study followed an emergent design to allow for the greatest understanding of the subjective reality of this group of Anglophone students and parents who had been involved in this French Immersion pilot program. Furthermore, it was assumed that an inductive inquiry of this nature which

> allows us to glimpse the universe of immersion as it is perceived by a few of those who have seen it first-hand and, more importantly, who have lived it, might allow for a more complete understanding and a richer insight into the immersion phenomenon. (Sloan, 1991, p. 38)

Data Collection And Data Analysis

Data collection and analyses occurred over a period of ten months which corresponded to the student participants first year within the high school with a population of 1000 students which housed this French Immersion pilot program. Data were primarily collected through semi-structured interviews allowing for the inclusion of questions which had not been anticipated, but which were relevant to the different individual experiences.

The six students selected to participate in the study were all Anglophones for whom French was a second language. Two of the respondents had transferred into the program from another school, one when the pilot group was in grade seven and one when the class had reached grade 10. The homeroom teacher of this grade ten pilot group aided in the selection of the six student respondents once the purpose and scope of the study had been explained. In order to capture the diversity of perspectives within the group, two students achieving at an average level, two at an above average level, and two at a below average level were selected from within this class of 27. The six student respondents varied similarly in their second language proficiency. Four of the respondents were female and two were male. The parents of each of the respondents also participated in the semi-structured interviews. Mothers and fathers were interviewed together in four of the six cases, and mothers only were interviewed in the remaining two instances. Each respondent was interviewed on two separate occasions over the ten month period in which the study was conducted. The transcribed interviews were submitted to member checks (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) before being analyzed. Data were also gathered through field notes made from school and classroom observations, and from school and school district documents (St. Albert Protestant Board of Education, 1989).

Documents, field notes, and interview transcriptions were subjected to content analysis using procedures as outlined in Bogdan and Biklen (1982). An audit trail (Guba & Lincoln, 1985) was maintained throughout the data collection and analysis stages of this study. In order to enhance the trustworthiness of the data and data analysis, an on-going

discussion with university educators knowledgeable of the French Immersion phenomenon was maintained during the construction of specific categories and as relevant themes related to the research questions emerged.

The responses to the three guiding questions of this study were re-organized into a category and theme structure in order to allow for meaningful interpretation of the data. The following categories were constructed from the data around the factors which students and parents found important when they made their choice to continue in the French Immersion pilot program at the senior high school level:

1. Attitude Towards the French Immersion Program and Experience:

(a) The students' reasons for initially choosing the French Immersion program

(b) The parents' reasons for initially choosing the French Immersion program

(c) The criteria students used to "judge" their experiences in the French Immersion program

(d) The criteria parents used to "judge" their experiences in the French Immersion program

(e) The commitment to continue in the French Immersion program at high school

(f) The value placed on the French language culture while learning in the immersion setting

(g) The role of the French language and culture in these students' lives after completing the French Immersion program

(h) Recommendations for the French Immersion program based on experiences

2. Perceptions and Significant Memories Of The French Immersion Experience:

(a) Perceptions and memories associated with instruction, the classroom, and the school

(b) Perceptions and memories of the group with whom these students have shared this experience.

Findings

From these categories the following major themes emerged which related to the students' choice to remain in the French Immersion program:

1. Commitment to continue and complete the French Immersion program at high school
2. Limitations of the French Immersion experience--the issues.

3. A profile of students who choose to remain in the French Immersion program at high

Although it is the third theme which is the focus of this article, a discussion of the first two themes has also been included to further contextualize the presentation of the descriptive profile of the "successful" French Immersion student.

Commitment To Continue And Complete The French Immersion Program At High School

The sense of commitment observed in these students who had chosen to study their core courses in French for high school credit appeared to have developed out of their positive experiences. The benefits which all six respondents perceived to be important were: (a) Fluency in their second language. They all felt that they could "speak French," even if their grammar was not excellent; (b) The ability to think to which two referred to as a "dual way." Three of the six students claimed that their average grade ten marks would not have been any higher if they had had instruction in English; (c) Being supported by a close knit group of peers with whom they had shared several formative years. All student and parent respondents spoke of the "friendships" which had evolved out of the students shared experiences; (d) The sense of pride at having been a part of a challenging alternative program, and having parents who were supportive and committed to the French Immersion program even when they did not speak or understand French. The parent respondents were committed to "getting these kids through" this pilot program because they believed in the intellectual, academic, social and personal benefits of learning French through immersion. These students' sense of commitment to continue in French Immersion until the completion of the program had grown out of what they had "lived" and were "living" at home as well at school.

Limitations Of The French Immersion Experience--The Issues

Students and parents also underscored what they perceived to be the limitations of the French Immersion program in general and this pilot program in particular. There were a minimum of eight of the 16 respondents who believed that the following perceived

limitations had or would become issues for the French Immersion program: (a) A shortage of qualified teachers with an expertise in the core subject high school discipline as well as the French language; (b) A restricted selection of courses and teachers. At the secondary level the students had no options to select from in French. They had the same teacher for at least two or three of their core subjects; (c) A lack of "interesting" learning resources for French second language learners. All high school textbooks in French had been written for Francophone learners. The vocabulary and syntax were challenging for all six of the student respondents. (d) There was limited program support for French Immersion students who were experiencing difficulty. Counsellors, administrators and tutors within the predominantly English high school did not speak French; (e) An apparent lack of recognition of the French Immersion Program within the large dual track high school. In spite of these perceived limitations and issues, all student and parent respondents indicated that they would recommend French Immersion high school study to others. All of the parent respondents felt compelled to share their insights and to offer what two parents referred to as "constructive advice to those in charge" and "those who would follow."

I undertook this study during the 1991-92 school year. Through a series personal communication with the school administration (Personal communications, June, 1994), I learned that: (a) 26 of the 27 students in this lead group had completed high school graduation requirements and had successfully passed the standardized Ministry of Education examinations. One of the original group of 27 had moved to an urban center where she continued to study French but was no longer in French Immersion; (b) 24 of the 26 had taken their core subjects in French for their three years at high school. This entitled them to a Bilingual Certificate of Merit as well as a High School Graduation Diploma; (c) Five of the six of the respondents who had participated in my study graduated with a Bilingual Certificate in 1994. Through a personal communication with a parent respondent, I learned that her daughter, the sixth respondent, received a Bilingual

Certificate in June, 1995; (d) One of the respondents had been selected as the valedictorian of the 1994 graduating class from over 250 graduands and delivered his address in both English and French. This same student was later determined to be the top high school scholar in the province of Alberta in 1994 based on his overall academic achievement.

One of the major conclusions of my 1992 study was that "This group of grade ten student respondents who had chosen to continue in the French Immersion program at high school were second language learners who, in spite of their varying levels of language proficiency and academic achievement, 'felt successful'" (Foster, 1992, p. 140). All six of the respondents completed high school French Immersion study and received a Bilingual Certificate in recognition of their participation in this alternative program. This evidence seemed to suggest that during an era of dropping enrollments and high levels of attrition in high school French Immersion programs across Canada, these six students and their classmates comprised a genre of anomaly. Furthermore, their academic success and completion of the French Immersion program in spite of the perceived limitations during their experience in the program seemed to support the contention that consideration must be given to factors other than academic achievement and perceived program limitations when probing the issue of participation levels in this bilingual alternative in high school programming.

Descriptive Profile of the "Successful" Bilingual High School Student

The "feeling of success" to which all students and parents made direct or indirect reference during the interviews which were conducted during that first year of high school appears to have been a significant factor in the decision to remain in this language program of choice. The profile of these students which was constructed from data analysis conducted during the original study (Foster, 1992, pp. 121-125) is presented here in order to probe the possible relationship between that feeling of success, and the retention of this group of bilingual high school learners.

Content analysis of the interview transcriptions of both parents and students revealed the importance that all placed on family conversations. These parents and children talked to each other about life in general and school as a part of "life's experiences." During the interviews with all of the parents it became clear that family dialogue was valued, but that there was a recognition of, and respect for the adolescents' expressed need for privacy and independence. The interviews with the six adolescent respondents indicated that these students considered themselves individuals quite independent of parents. The confidence, maturity, and "success" of these students was attributable at least in part to the positive and supportive relationships which they had with their parents.

The following is a collection of key phrases which were repeated by at least three of the students and parents during the interviews. They describe common attributes of the student respondents and constitute what I have called a descriptive profile of the "successful" bilingual high school student.

Adolescents' Views Of Themselves As French Immersion Students

The students' perceptions of themselves had to be inferred from what they said or from what they said about others within the group. Although the exact word or phrase varied, content analysis and member checks established that the intent and context were similar.

Phrases repeated by three or more of the student respondents underscored: (a) Their confidence in their own language proficiency or that of the group. They said: "We speak French"; "We speak better than we write French"; "I am bilingual." One of the students who was experiencing difficulty in the French Immersion classes was still very proud of her bilingual status. She claimed that having the ability to dream in French was a measurement of success, even if she carried her English accent into her dream world. In French she stated, "Je rêve en français mais avec un accent"; (b) Their confidence in their ability to learn core subjects in a French Immersion setting. They made comments like: "I am doing well"; "I can learn in either English or French"; "I would find learning in French harder than in English now"; "Learning in French is a dual way of thinking"; "Speaking

French is second nature"; (c) The importance that they attached to learning with the group of students with whom they shared the French Immersion experience. They said: "Our French class is comfortable"; "We are relaxed"; "We are all friends'; "We are like brothers and sisters"; "We are more mature in some ways and less mature in other ways"; "We help each other"; "We could do better."

Parents' View Of Their Child As A Developing Adolescent And As A French Immersion Student

The parent respondents described their children in similar ways. Although the exact word or phrase varied from one respondent to the next, through content analysis and member checks it became clear that the intent and context were similar. When speaking about their 14 or 15 year old child, parents tended to differentiate between what they perceived to be their child's strengths and weaknesses as a developing adolescent, and as a French Immersion student.

Phrases that were repeated by three or more of the parent respondents underscored: (a) Parents' belief that their child had strengths and weaknesses as an individual. They said: "He/she is secure"; "He/she is confident"; "He/she is capable of making decisions"; "He/she is level-headed"; "He/she speaks his/her mind"; "He/she is courageous"; "He/she is loyal to friends"; "He/she is out-going"; "He/she fits well in the group"; "He/she is affected by peer pressure"; "He/she is influenced by friends"; "He/she is impatient"; "He/she can be stubborn"; (b) Parents' belief that their child had strengths and weaknesses as a French Immersion student. They said: "He/she is bright"; "He/she is motivated"; "He/she needs challenges"; "He/she does well at school"; "He/she is average in an above average group"; "He/she doesn't feel that he/she is bright in this above average group"; "He/she is not as dedicated a student as he/she could be"; "We don't worry about him/her"; "He/she likes school"; "He/she likes French Immersion"; (c) Parents' awareness of their child's second language proficiency. They said: "He/she is proud of being a French

Immersion student"; "He/she is good at speaking French"; "He/she is bilingual"; "He/she speaks better than he/she writes"; "He/she speaks better than he/she listens."

Although this descriptive profile is not exhaustive or conclusive, it does outline certain traits common within this group of students who successfully completed high school French Immersion study. In spite of perceived limitations and issues, both parents and students expressed an appreciation of the challenge of being involved in this alternative program. All student respondents, regardless of their scholastic standing, expressed a profound sense of pride and self-identified as a "French Immersion learner" within this predominantly English high school. The above profile suggests that these bilingual students were retained in this high school French Immersion program because of the intellectual, academic, personal and social benefits which they derived, fueled by feelings of confidence and success evolving out their individual and shared experiences.

Conclusions And Implications For Further Study

This study focused on the perspectives of a select group of students who were successfully retained in a French Immersion program, kindergarten through high school. Consideration was also given to the perspectives of these students' parents. Given the continuing decline in enrollments in French Immersion high school programs in Alberta and the other Canadian provinces (Commissioner of Official Languages, 1996; Alberta Education, 1996), further study of high school French Immersion programs with a consistent level of participation would provide a greater understanding of the potential linkages between contextual variables and student retention. Further investigation of programs with elevated rates of retention could potentially contribute to the current knowledge of the factors affecting participation levels in this bilingual alternative in high school programming.

References

Alberta Education. (1996). *Education in Alberta: Facts and figures 1996.* Edmonton, AB: Alberta Government.

Bogdan, G., & Biklen, S. (1982). *Qualitative research for education: An introduction to theory and methods.* Boston, MA: Allyn & Bacon.

Commissioner of Official Languages. (1996). *Annual report 1995.* Ottawa, ON: Minister of Supply and Services Canada.

Commissioner of Official Languages. (1992). *Annual report 1991.* Ottawa, ON: Minister of Supply and Services Canada.

Cummins, J., & Swain, M. (1986). *Bilingualism in education.* New York: Longman Group, pp. 1-90.

Foster, R. Y. (1992). *The French immersion choice at high school.* Unpublished master's project, University of Alberta, Edmonton, Canada.

Guba, E., & Lincoln, Y. (1985). *Naturalistic inquiry.* Beverly Hills, CA: Sage Publications.

Halsall, N. (1991). *Attrition/retention of students in French immersion with particular emphasis on secondary school.* Ottawa, ON: Canadian Parents For French.

Lambert, W., & Tucker, R. (1972). *Bilingual education of children.* Rowley, MA: Newbury House Publishers, Inc.

St. Albert Protestant Board of Education. (1989). *S'entraider, c'est cheminer--reaching out.* St. Albert, CA: St. Albert Protestant Board of Education.

Sloan, T. (1991). Five graduates of French immersion. *Language and Society, 36,* 38-39.

Stern, H. (1984). The immersion phenomenon. *Language and Society, 12,* 4-10.

Tardif, C., & Weber, S. (1987). French immersion research: A call for new perspectives. *The Canadian Modern Language Review, 44*(1), 67-71.

Yalden, M. (1984). French immersion: A Canadian experience. *Language and Society, 12,* 3.